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MARYLAND BRIEFING

MONTGOMERY COUNCIL

Panel First to Urge State to Double Tobacco Tax

The Montgomery County Council became the first jurisdiction in the state yesterday to call on the General Assembly to double the state's cigarette tax to expand health-care coverage for the uninsured.

The measure, backed by a coalition of community groups, would increase the tax to \$2 a pack.

"We can only do so much without significant action by the General Assembly," Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At-Large) said after the council passed the resolution.

Council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring), a candidate for state attorney general, accused the federal government of an "abdication of responsibility" and criticized Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) for dropping 4,000 pregnant women and children from the state's medical assistance program.

"Access to health care should be an all-hands-on-deck enterprise," he said.

Ehrlich later restored coverage for women in the program, and a group of children has sued over the budget cuts.

Health-care advocates behind the tax effort said the symbolic action by the state's largest jurisdiction might prompt others to follow. The Healthy Maryland Initiative stalled in a legislative committee this year.

— Ann E. Marimow